



Bronnen

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Following Kant: European idea for a universal history with an intercultural intent

Deze aflevering van persoonlijkheden handelt over een essay van Kant. Jörn Rüsen wil de ideeën die in dit essay naar voren komen toespitsen op de huidige tijd.

My paper refers to Immanuel Kant's short essay 'Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht' (Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent) from 1784.¹ This text expresses an outline of a western - or, more precisely, a European - master-narrative in the formative period of modernization. It is universalistic and comprehensive, and it includes most of those principles which still belong to the most effective elements of western civil society.

I would like to present you a version of this text which I think can serve as an outline for a European master-narrative today. I feel committed to most of Kant's arguments and want to apply it to the present-day situation. Today the problem of intercultural communication plays an enormous role, at least in respect to the task of philosophy and the humanities.² It is their task to achieve an intellectually responsible cultural orientation in the globalization process. Such an orientation has to explicate and reflect the possibilities and fundamental rules of picking up the challenge of cultural differences as an issue of human identity, and it has to work out a framework of intercultural communication, which can be accepted by all those who want to participate in it.

In my paper I want to transfer Kant's main arguments concerning a European master-narrative to the circumstances of the beginning twenty-first century and specify his arguments in respect to the issue of cultural difference and intercultural communication.

1 I quote it according to the First Edition (A9; Immanuel Kant, *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik*. 1. Teil (Werke in 10 Bänden, vol. 9) (Darmstadt 1968) 31-61.

2 For history cf. Jörn Rüsen ed., *Western historical thinking. An intercultural debate* (New York en Oxford) 2002.

My attempt starts from the presupposition that every culture needs a master-narrative in order to express, reflect and reformulate its peculiarity and difference from other cultures. To say it in the form of a slogan: no cultural identity without a master-narrative.³ I want to draw an outline of such a master narrative to which I feel committed as a German European by my application of Kant's 'Idee' to the present. My presentation is an offer of a European scholar to the international and intercultural community of scholars dealing with the issue of how to come to terms with the problem of cultural diversity as a matter of intercultural communication.

The title

'Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte' (idea or concept for a general history) means a proposal for a comprehensive history of mankind including all cultures and times. As a proposal it is addressed to an ongoing discourse on universal history.⁴ Kant presents a proposal and not a result, an argument and not a fixed set of statements. This has to be confirmed today. A European master-narrative presenting cultural identity has to be a dynamic discourse and therefore open for other arguments, open for critique and change in an intercultural communication.

But what about the approach to general history? We all know that the enlightenment's philosophy of history states a universal history which in fact is only a generalized western history. This kind of universalization included a devaluation of non-western societies and therefore served as an ideological means of western domination in the beginning of the globalization process in the eighteenth century. The concept of the enlightenment of universal history can be addressed as the first step of Europe's expansion all over the world. So this kind of universal history has met a lot of criticism, and there have been a lot of attempts to replace it by other concepts which basically denied a universalistic approach to history. But, nevertheless, I would like to defend this approach.

- 3 Lyotard's postmodern declaration of the end of master-narratives only indicates the end of the hitherto powerful master-narrative of western civilization. It does not answer the question for another representation of western cultural identity.
- 4 Other contributors were Schlözer (Schlözer, August Ludwig, *Vorstellung einer Universalhistorie* (Göttingen 1772) reprint, ed. Horst Walter Blanke, Hagen 1990), Herder (Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit, 1774) and Schiller (his famous inaugural speech 'Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?' from 1789).

My reason for this is the argument that a convincing master-narrative of today has to meet the globalization process, and I don't see any plausible alternative to an idea of the human species or humankind in a temporal perspective. This is the only universality which really includes all cultures, and therefore it is the widest horizon of human identity as a cultural phenomenon. Identity is the result of a mental procedure and belongs to the core of culture. Identity is the mode of self-relatedness of human beings which defines culture as the contrary of nature. So if one searches for a universality which includes all cultural difference, the Kantian outlook at universal history is still convincing.⁵

But, nevertheless, a severe problem remains: identity always is specific. Expressing European identity in such a concept of universal history means using a universalistic temporalized concept of humankind including all cultures. How can such a concept refer to difference and peculiarity? How can a peculiarity, a difference from others, be expressed by an idea which includes the others?

The first answer to find is that such a concept is abstract and does not address cultural difference at all. But since it is a historical concept, it is related to change and this includes difference. It is related to experience as well, and historical experience is the experience of diversity. As a historical concept it is not only related to experience, but at the same time it has a normative impact. And it is this impact which is an essential element of cultural identity presented in the form of a master-narrative. So we carefully have to look into Kant's argumentation in order to avoid an ideological generalization of European culture to the development of the human species.

The third element in Kant's title which has to be confirmed for today is his emphasis on 'Absicht', which means approach, intent or aim. Kant's aim is cosmopolitan, a vision 'einer allgemein das Recht verwaltenden bürgerlichen Gesellschaft' (of a civil society which universally rules human life by law).⁶ This concept of general law in a universalistic outlook on historical development reaching into the future is still important for the present-day situation of intercultural communication in one respect: Kant's concept is based on the fundamental norm of equality, and this is a necessary pre-supposition of an intercultural communication which can

5 A similar argumentation in favor of the Enlightenment's philosophy of history can be found in Johannes Rohbeck, *Technik - Kultur - Geschichte. Eine Rehabilitierung der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Suhrkamp 2000).

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be accepted by all those who want to enter it and find recognition of their difference from others.

But equality is only a necessary condition for a successful intercultural communication, not sufficient. So we have to change Kant's cosmopolitanism into a multiculturalism on the basis of the constitutive and comprehensive principle of equality. This step decisively has to be done, and it leads from Kant to the philosophy of historicism.⁷ Here the universality of the human species or of humankind is looked at as being realized by a temporalized variety of different cultures and their changes: unity of humankind by diversity of cultures. Leopold von Ranke has formulated this historized Kantian philosophy of history in the following way: 'In der Herbeiziehung der verschiedenen Nationen und der Individuen zur Idee der Menschheit und der Kultur ist der Fortschritt ein unbedingter.'⁸ (we left the translation out)

First Thesis

Kant's first thesis states that it is humankind's destiny to develop all its potentials given by nature in a certain way, namely 'zweckmässig', which literally means, according to an aim or an intent. This aim is as universalistic as nature is the universalistic starting point for history in the origin of the human race.⁹ I would like to translate Kant's thesis into the following form: The universalism of the historical perspective of humankind is grounded in human nature as a necessity of transforming nature into culture. Since every cultural identity refers to the subjectivity of those who want to know who they are and how they differ from others and since this subjectivity is the result of transcending nature into culture, cultural diversity and its interrelationship is grounded in and starts from this transformation.

Cultural diversity has a common source exactly here where humankind starts with the natural evolution of the human species which is forced to develop culture in order to survive. Culture is an achievement of human

7 Cf. Friedrich Jaeger und Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus. Eine Einführung* (München 1992); Rüsen, Jörn.: *Konfigurationen des Historismus. Studien zur deutschen Wissenschaftskultur* (Suhrkamp 1993).

8 Leopold von Ranke, *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte*, Th. Schieder u. H. Berding ed. (Aus Werk und Nachlaß, vol.2) (München 1971) 80.

9 The best approval of this idea is Günter Dux, *Historisch-genetische Theorie der Kultur. Instabile Welten. Zur prozessualen Logik im kulturellen Wandel* (Weilerswist 2000).



Immanuel Kant (1742-1804). Uit: Manfred Kuehn, *Kant. A biography* (Cambridge 2001).

subjectivity. Human beings have to interpret their world and themselves in order to live in it and with themselves. Culture is the epitome of this interpretation.¹⁰ Human subjectivity as the source of this interpretation always is particular since it has to distinguish itself from others, so the general aim of culture can only be a realization of differences in the course of time.

This raises the question, whether there is an idea of communality in this difference, an equivalent of nature which all human beings share in the field of culture.

Second Thesis

Kant's second thesis answers this question: The transformation of nature into culture is realized by human reason, and it is this work of reason which gives history meaning and sense. The use of reason, seen in the perspective of general history, has to be attributed to the species and not to single cultural units. At least in one respect Kant's concept of reason has to be applied to the present problems of intercultural communication: Kant has conceptualized reason as the human potential for culture in an inclusive way. Reason is the case, where people orient their lives by culturally interpreting it, by generating sense. And since this is the case where and when ever human beings live, reason cannot be only claimed for specific cultural manifestations.

10 Cf. Jörn Rüsen: "Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Kulturwissenschaften?" in: Kühne-Bertram, Gudrun, Lessing, Hans-Ulrich und Steenblock, Volker ed., *Kultur verstehen. Zur Geschichte und Theorie der Geisteswissenschaften* [Festschrift für Günther Scholtz] (Würzburg 2003) 119-28.

So Kant's second thesis fundamentally refuses the strategy of exclusion in the European master-narrative. Kant even goes a step further: culture as an inclusive process of historical development has to be conceptualized as an aim of human activities and this aim is inclusive as well. What does this mean for our treatment of cultural diversity today? According to Kant there can only be one answer: to conceptualize humankind as an aim for human activity in which procedures of forming identity by differing from others are ruled by the principle of inclusion. This has to be explicated into a concept of reason as a cultural power of recognizing and acknowledging difference on the bases of equality.

Third Thesis

In his third thesis Kant presents reason as the decisive quality of universal history. Following him is to understand by reason the possibility of human beings to produce their own cultural world according to their own ideas. If we understand the process of this production as being different from natural processes, I don't see any basic argument not to follow this perspective. It states the idea of liberty as a mode of transgressing nature in producing culture as a necessary life condition for human beings (who nevertheless still belong to nature). The idea of history, which follows the principle of reason beyond nature, states the permanent production of culture out of itself beyond natural determination.

So the general aim of history is humankind as a species of reason, i.e. the use of reason in a cultural constitution of humankind. This is a projection. As long as the main quality of reason is understood as self-determination of humans in producing culture, this principle has to be accepted, since it confirms cultural difference and at the same time a commonness in all these differences, namely the commonness of a chance to follow rules which the people have given themselves. In respect to the challenging problems of intercultural relationships today, this Kantian thesis can be understood or translated as a universal principle of cultural individualization. At least historicism has given the idea of human reason the temporal feature of diversity.

Fourth Thesis

Cultural difference always means 'clash of civilizations'. Traditionally the cultural procedures and processes of bringing about togetherness as difference from others is ruled by the logic of ethnocentrism, so clash is even 'natural' for cultural diversity.

In his fourth thesis Kant exactly addresses this 'clash' by speaking of social antagonism as the pushing force for historical change. We have no problems to apply this thesis to cultural difference today. We can understand the way human beings deal with their difference from each other as a continuing and never ending struggle for recognition of one's own identity forming difference from others and *vice versa*.

Kant's argument of social antagonism should be applied to the struggle for recognition in the field of identity formation. Doing this we open up a realistic insight into the dynamics of this formation process. Here Kant essentially differs from Huntington,¹¹ for whom the clash is the last word concerning the relationship between different cultures, thus stating it as a kind of nature (the Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*). Kant shapes this realistic perspective historically (and not naturally): he reflects the necessity of bringing this antagonism into a form of human conduct, in which it is applied to rules by those who have to suffer from it. According to Kant, the specifically historical dynamics in social antagonism and in the cultural struggle for recognition consists of a permanent transformation of a natural conflict or war into a lawful order on the basis of reason stating equality as a frame for individualization.

Exactly this transformation is defined as progress by Kant. I don't see how we can deny this idea of progress if we apply it to the permanence and strength of the struggle for power in intercultural relationships and its conflict generating force in history.

Fifth Thesis

In his fifth thesis Kant describes this frame of civilization for social antagonism as a civil society which universally rules human life by law (*eine allgemein das Recht verwaltende bürgerliche Gesellschaft*). This idea of civilization by civil society can be applied to the struggle for power in culture,

11 Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (New York 1996).

where it is a struggle for recognition of differences. As a social framework for ruling antagonism civil society domesticates the will for power into a form of life in which the liberty of one person or group is only limited by the liberty of other persons or groups. This principle of civilization is a very formal one, and therefore it allows cultural difference. Its liberalism of law and constitution has to be translated into a liberalism of intercultural relationships in which the liberty of difference finds its only limit in the liberty of others for their difference. We can call this the 'rule of law' (or better: of practical reason) in intercultural communication.

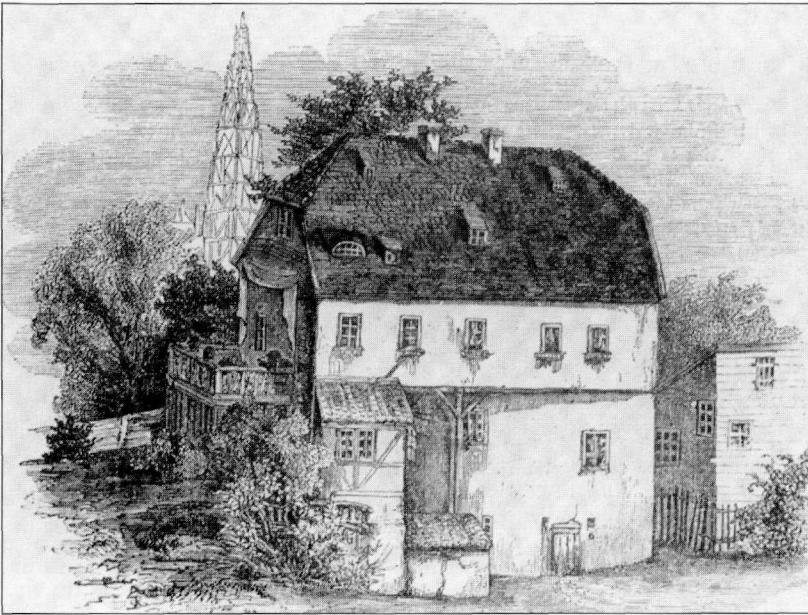
Kant's liberalism still belongs to the political identity of Western and European countries and nations. Their basic principle of equality is a fundamental norm for regulating cultural difference. But equality in the Western tradition is abstract and formal. It has an open social flank, namely the guarantee of social conditions for using this chance of liberty in living one's own life according to one's own cultural orientation. This is the issue of equality as a social and economic problem. To my mind Europe and the United States seem to differ by the degree to which they ascribe the solution of this problem to their prospect of civil society and its universalization as a life form which might tame the strength of capitalist economy into a force of wealth production which makes this social problem of equality prone to solve.

Sixth Thesis

In his sixth thesis Kant addresses the problem of politics in respect to the development of civil society: without the use of power it can't be tamed into civility. For Kant this contradiction can't be dissolved. Thus the prospect for a universal civil society with its political and social conditions for culture and individualization gets a utopian quality. This can be applied to the topical discussion on the logic of history as an argument for introducing utopia or at least utopian elements into history – an argument which has become even stronger after Kant in respect to the negative historical experiences in the twentieth century.

Seventh Thesis

In the seventh thesis Kant addresses the international dimension of the development of civil society. He concludes that progress from the domestic to the international sphere in developing constitutional political elements of civil society is necessary and an aim for further politics. Exactly this is



Het huis van Kant. Uit; Manfred Kuehn, *Kant. A biography* (Cambridge 2001).

the case today, even more in respect to cultural difference. The idea of individualization and mutual recognition has to be applied to all cultures Kant did not have in mind. The option to apply this and the ongoing obstacles are demonstrated by the topical institutionalization of an international court for crimes against humanity.

Eighth Thesis

In the eighth thesis Kant says that the idea of history itself is a moving force in human activities. It contributes to the realization of the general prospect. This argument meets the role of historical thinking in practical life. Thereby the humanities are reminded of the fact that they are a part of their subject matter and thus responsible for the role reason may play in practical life, the very reason they are committed to as academic disciplines.

Ninth Thesis

In the ninth and last thesis Kant argues in favour of using such a philosophical idea for the purposes of historical interpretation. At his time history was just at the brink of establishing itself as an academic discipline. By doing so it denied philosophy of history as a conceptual means of the methodical research procedures of gaining solid knowledge of the past. But there are two reasons to rehabilitate philosophy of history for historical thinking: (1) Today, historical studies and the other historically oriented humanities and social sciences urgently need an idea of global history to meet the challenge of globalization. (2) This is even more the case, since interpretation has lost its methodical quality in the academic disciplines in favor of representation as mainly a poetical and rhetorical procedure.¹²

Kant's emphasis on reason should be picked up and reformulated as a plea for methodical rationality in the humanities. This rationality is rooted in practical reason which can and should guide the cognitive work of the humanities. As long as they follow the rule of reason in constructing narratives, there will be a chance that these narratives follow the line of mutual acknowledgement of those cultural differences which were expressed and affirmed by them.

12 Cf. Jörn Rüsen : 'Historical studies between modernity and postmodernity' in: *South African Journal of Philosophy* 13 (1994) 183-189 ('La historia, entre modernidad y postmodernidad' in: Andrés-Gallego, José ed., *New History, Nouvelle Histoire: Hacia una Nueva Historia* (Madrid 1993) 119-138), idem: 'Lo(o)s(en)ing the Order of History: Some aspects of historical studies at the intersection of modernity, postmodernity and the discussion on memory' in: *Historia. Journal of the Historical Society of South Africa* 45(2) November (2000) 255-270.